

Musician Does Not Mean Songwriter

Chances are you are not a songwriter.

Playing an instrument makes you a musician. Playing an instrument really well and for a living makes you a pro-musician. You probably remember the time it took from learning the first chord to becoming a well rounded musician who learns pieces quickly, even sight-reads and records parts in the studio with very few takes.

All this playing, studying, all the lessons, all the gigs, all the jams, all the mistakes, all this time... all are necessary to make you the musician you are.

Now here is a surprise that really should not be a surprise. It takes a similar amount of learning about counterpoint, harmony, structure, ostinatos, lyrics, symbolism, listener perceptions, etc... to be an equally adept songwriter. Once you have done all that studying it will take a several years of writing for anything from country to twelve-tone music for your skills to become rock solid.

All the time you have spent playing has helped with an understanding of music, but it is by no means the full education required to become a great songwriter.

Just because you have written songs does not necessarily mean that you are a fully rounded songwriter either. I sometimes edit my show reels or samples from film projects I have scored. This does not make me an editor.

A little checklist:

- Do fans or customers regularly pay for your music?
- Do other people play your songs?
- Do you know how to write four-part counterpoint?
- Are you well versed in classical and jazz harmony?
- Do you regularly write music on tight deadlines?
- Is your work used in a commercial context?

I encounter the same phenomenon every day. There are many good musicians or singers with good ideas and concepts that managed to record a song / album that is passable. For a great album they would need a couple of years more songwriting training and a real producer. Unfortunately these artists spend their money and energy trying to force their sub-par material into the market, rather than either spending the time to improve the writing or hiring someone who can help.

The resistance to working with a professional on their music is almost comical. See my case studies article. Everyone on the Billboard charts has a team of experts, but you can accomplish this all by yourself?

While you were out playing gigs, someone else sat at up home and studied songwriting or got a degree in composition. The songwriter depends on your superior performance skills in the studio and on stage. Why would you not utilize somebody's superior writing skills? A songwriter feels no shame having a better singer perform his music, so why is there an issue working with someone to make your songs better?

I was a full time lecturer for guitar and I still prefer to hire a professional guitarist who plays professionally and regularly. I write and produce all day. The professional guitarist will be in better shape to play.

Check out successful production teams and you will find that they have experts for each part of the production. If you are not a professional songwriter (meaning you pay your bills with your writing skills), you may want to think about the fact that you are undermining your chances as an artist, as a musician, on stage and on recordings by having an amateur create the core product for you as an artist.

There is so much music that sounds the same, so I think it is important that you fight for your unique sound and for your voice. Working with a songwriter, or an "old-fashioned" producer, does not mean that you will be turned into something you do not want to be.

It means that you will sound your best and become the artist you are meant to be. A good co-songwriter or producer will support you, sounding your best, not changing who you are.

Lars Deutsch
January 9th, 2014